If you remember the classic book, Moby Dick, you will remember a seemingly insignificant deck hand, by the name of Pip. In the story, while pursuing the whale, Pip falls overboard and flounders in the water while the whaling boat, tethered by harpoon to the whale, is carried off by the big fish. When the sailors finally come back to rescue the boy, who had been in the sea for quite some time, Pip has gone mad.

Most scholars of the book observe that Melville was commenting on the insanity of being overboard, in the middle of the ocean, with nothing to hold on to and in complete and utter isolation. Pip is in many ways a symbol for the entire whaling ship, for it too is adrift, alone at sea, though on a mission to kill Moby Dick.

Without his community, Pip went crazy. He needed the solid feel of the vessel, to hear the voices of his fellow sailors, to know that we was not alone, in order to have his sense of balance and proportion. Tossing around at sea, he lost that stability and thereby went insane.

I have been with you in hospital rooms, at some very dark and dismal times. I have walked the halls of nursing homes and seen people trying to make their way through one more day. This past year, my own family had its setbacks. My mother in law, who was staying with us in May, had a serious illness and required skilled nursing care. So here we were on a Saturday afternoon, having a hospital bed being installed in our living room, and at the very same time, my daughter, Ricca was getting picked up for her prom. Her date turned up, with tuxedo and bouquet in hand, just as the mechanical hospital bed was being unloaded from the truck. I turned to Laurie and we both understood that this was life. One minute, off to a night of adventure and excitement and in the blink of an eye, you are having your most basic physical needs attended to, by family, friends and professionals.

When we think about it, we are all, to a certain degree, like Pip. We are bobbing around through time. One minute we’re up on a wave and the next, we’re down. And to make matters worse, we think we can control the currents, but we can’t. There are forces that are more powerful than the human will, as the people of Joplin, Missouri or Pennsylvania on the banks of the Susquehanna can tell us.

When tragedy strikes, we must answer existential questions. We must try to make some sense of
it all. If we are at one point or another Pip, then we must get to solid ground, or perish.

Where there is no inherent meaning, we must make it. Where there is no purpose to our suffering, we must fashion it. Where faith is destroyed, we must find it, for without it, we might very well drown in despair.

And this leads me to some of the most powerful words that we as a Jewish community have ever said. These words link us to the past, help us find the faith needed to survive today and help us build for tomorrow. They are not, as you might expect, Shema Yisrael, but Yitgadal, veyitkadash, yehi shme rabba.

Think about how you feel when you say these words. Do you remember where you were, where when you last said them. How do they make you feel?

Most of us associate these words with mourning, but in truth, there are several different types of Kaddishes. The oldest is called the Kaddish d'Rabbanan or the Rabbi’s Kaddish. It is a celebration of the wisdom and commitment of the rabbis and is recited by traditional Jews after studying rabbinic literature.

Then there is the Hatzi Kaddish, which is a service divider, more or less. It breaks up the liturgy and is found before the Barekhu, the Amidah and in traditional services, following readings from the Torah. The Chatzi Kaddish is first observed in one of our earliest prayer books from the 10th century. There is the Kaddish Shalem, a fourth century prayer asking God to accept our prayers at the end of services. To hear this prayer on Yom Kippur, you’ll have to wait to the end of Neilah. It asks God to accept all prayers that were previously recited.

The mourner’s Kaddish, perhaps the most well known, doesn’t appear until the 11th century. It is a relative liturgical latecomer. The Rabbis introduced the prayer as a response to the massive deaths resulting from the Christian Crusades. The rabbis introduced a martyrology service into Yom Kippur liturgy and Mourner’s Kaddish. Anyone, the rabbis reasoned, who was killed because they were Jewish, is a martyr and is to have the same merit as if they lived the life of a rabbi. As the rabbis were to be honored for their learning, martyrs were to be praised for their courage and their refusal to abandon their faith under duress.

A friend of mine told me about coming to services to say Kaddish for her aunt, this past year. Honestly, she told me, she didn’t want to go. She came with a belligerent and hostile attitude. She confessed that she got little out of faith, tradition and community. But she came with their family out of a
sense of duty and obligation. During services, they were cracking jokes, misbehaving and generally turning off to the Shabbat activities. Then it was time for Kaddish. She heard her aunt’s name called out by the rabbi and a lump grew in her throat. She mouthed the words of Kaddish, under her breath. She turned to her husband and sister and that’s when the tears began to flow. Hearing the name, saying the ancient words, was all it took. My friend’s tears flowed, her sobs were silent but powerful and she was changed completely. She later told me how floored she was and how much it meant to recite those ancient words at the right time, at the right place, flanked by family.

Here’s the mystery: Kaddish can transform us by linking us from one generation to the next. The Kaddish is not so much a prayer, as it is a chain.

Henrietta Szold who founded Hadassah in the early 20th century insisted on saying Kaddish for her mother despite the fact, that it was not traditional for women to say the prayer. On September 16, 1916 Szold wrote to Haym Peretz who had offered to say the prayer for her. “It is impossible for me to find words in which to tell you how deeply I was touched by your offer to act as “Kaddish” for my dear mother. I cannot even thank you — it is something that goes beyond words. …. And yet I cannot ask you to say Kaddish after my mother. The Kaddish means to me that the survivor publicly and markedly manifests his wish and intention to assume the relation to the Jewish community, which his parent had, so that the chain of tradition remains unbroken from generation to generation, each adding its own link. You can do that for the generations of your family, I must do that for the generations of mine.”

Years later, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote about this letter and her recitation of Kaddish, “Szold's plea for celebration of our common heritage … is captivating. I recall her words even to this day when a colleague's position betrays a certain lack of understanding.”

I remember walking through the Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, years back, and seeing so many names of the lost in their archives. I wondered, who will say Kaddish for them? Who will recite their names and keep their souls in our hearts? When I realized that no one would, for their children and their children are gone, I realized that we at Beth Or had to. So, we recite their names every Shabbat here at Beth Or, so that we won’t forget what little we know of these poor souls. To hear their names out loud, keeps their presence alive within us and within me.
But Kaddish is not just about connecting with the dead; it is a praise of God, in which we give thanks for life and faith, despite death. We say, “yehe shmei rabba mevorach leolam ulmei almaya.” May God’s great name be praised forever and ever. This is a rephrasing of the second line of the Shema. So why say it here?

It’s because most of us are least likely to give thanks when we stand before an open grave. At a time of loss, it’s human nature to despair of God and faith, but that is precisely the time when we must do so. When an ancient Pharaoh died, who was considered to be God incarnate, the priests of Egypt needed to convince the people that death was not real, so they built the pyramids, which were tombs in which the living could continue to pay homage. So statues were set up and put in rooms apart, so the faithful could still make petition to the dead. Judaism was the first faith to teach that not one person was God, but that we are all reflections of God. But this created a new set of problems. If we are a reflection of God, what happens to that holy presence when one of us dies? Is God’s divinity diminished? The rabbis answered, “We must reaffirm the presence of Goodness and God despite the diminution of holiness. We say “Itgadal,” “God is great.” We say “Itkaddash” “God is holy.” These words are our pyramids, our defiance against death.

I will never forget officiating at a funeral for a Jewish American Army general. Just before we recited Kaddish at the cemetery, an honor guard gave him a 21-gun salute. I must tell you, that I was emotionally shaken. It almost brought me to tears; it was so evocative and jarring. After the last volley, we recited kaddish and I realized, that we in our own way were saying the same thing as the army. The military was saying that the good fight will continue and the next generation will pick up the tools of defense in honor of their fallen comrade. Likewise, we recite kaddish to state publicly that we will continue to carry on the traditions and praise life, love and faith, despite death.

Thirdly, Kaddish helps us heal emotionally.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, when we have fewer in attendance, I ask those present to recite the names out loud off those they wish to remember before Kaddish. We can only do this when we have a small gathering. One by one, I see you rise and respectfully remember. One by one, I see others shake their heads in remembrance, for they too often recollect those being named. We have a moment that
is so real and personal, for loss is after all, individual. But then we all rise and comfort each other as a group to recite Kaddish. Each has their pain that only they experience, but then it is lifted up by one another and borne as a group. Kaddish, which must be recited in a minyan, can be so therapeutic.

Just two weeks ago, a dear friend of mine from Beth Or told me on a Friday night when he came to say Kaddish for his father, “When I come to say Kaddish for my dad, he is with me. I have an hour just to remember and feel his love. I could do that elsewhere, but I find that I don’t. Saying Kaddish here, brings me peace.”

Scientific studies have repeatedly shown that with memory it’s “use it or lose it.” If we don’t spend some time thinking about a person, spend some time “refreshing the memory,” the memories fade. Kaddish is about reinforcing the memories.

Let’s go back to Pip for a moment. Moby Dick was written about a true sinking of a whaling ship, the Essex in 1820. The survivors were adrift for months. Some died, most went mad, just like Pip. Compare that to the recently published story, Unbroken, about an air force bombardier, Louis Zamperini who crashed in 1943 into the pacific, just where the Essex sank. He was adrift in the ocean and confronted sharks, starvation and crippling thirst like the survivors of the Essex. Similar circumstances, starvation, heat, duration of being adrift and thirst. But this man somehow, would not capitulate to his dire condition. It’s not just what happens to us, it’s what happens within us that can make all the difference.

Some hope and some despair. Some believe and some do not. Some hold on and some go insane. Maybe the difference between the two for us, is whether or not we can metaphorically say the Kaddish. Kaddish fights the grief and the despair by transforming our tears into triumph. It is about finding a heart of gratitude even in loss. It’s about finding joy after the loss, it’s about trying to become better, not bitter.

For years, I hated the story that I’m going to tell you about Rabbi Akiba. But I didn’t fully understand it till now. According to the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva, would say, when something bad happened, “Kal d’avid Rachmana letav avid—whatever God does, must be for the good.” Rabbi Akiva traveled with a candle, a rooster, and a donkey: the candle so he could study Torah at night, the rooster—his alarm clock—to wake him up, and finally the donkey to carry his possessions. Akiva stopped at a city. He tried to get
lodging at an inn but there was no room available. He went from house to house but nobody would let him in. So he walked into the neighboring woods and set up camp. All of a sudden, a strong wind kicked up and extinguished the candle. A few moments later, a ferocious lion emerged from behind his tent and killed his donkey. All that remained was the rooster. A ravenous cat appeared and devoured it. Akiva was completely stuck. What did he say? “Whatever God does, must be for the good.”

The next morning, he discovered that a band of robbers had attacked the town during the night, killing the people and stealing their money. The robbers escaped into the forest. If they had seen the candle, or heard the noise of the rooster and donkey, Rabbi Akiva would have met the same fate as the townspeople. God had saved his life by extinguishing his candle and taking his animals.

I had always hated this story, because I thought, how can you say to someone suffering, “Heh, things could be worse, or everything that happens is for the good?” Sounds trivial at best, cruel at worst. But maybe this story is trying to teach us a Kaddish lesson, that despair and faithlessness can be worse than the tragic event itself. When hardship comes, it is a double loss if we lose our faith, our hope, our gratitude and joy. Struggle with the pain, and try to find the meaning. Struggle with the loss and try to find hope. It can be infinitely easier to despair and to complain. It takes courage to find the good and give thanks, even in the face of hardship.

An English writer of the seventeenth century, once wrote, “I am not so much afraid of death, as ashamed thereof.” How can we be created in the image of God and then die? How can we be so lofty and noble and then turn to dust? It’s embarrassing. Maybe the question should be reversed. Maybe, we’re not nobility turned to dust, but dust turned into nobility and the Kaddish in part, makes that possible.

We Jews recite Kaddish, a defiance against mortality, finitude and despair. Its words tell us that we shall not be set adrift, alone. We shall not be destroyed or lost or be ashamed of our transience. Those who mourn can find the resolve to persevere. Those who have died shall not be lost or forgotten.

So, when you get a letter informing you that a loved one has a yarzheit and that we’ll say Kaddish for them, don’t throw the letter away and go elsewhere. Come to shul. Remember, honor a memory, give thanks for life and love, reach out to your community and let them reach out to you. Hold on to your faith.
You’ll teach your children about honoring you when you’re gone.

As we embark on our own existential quests on this Yom Kippur, let us ask ourselves, are we willing to hope, believe, remember, and be grateful? Are we willing to stand amidst the ashes of fury and offer words of praise? Are we willing and able, when lost at sea to say Kaddish?